

Is It Better to Be Behind on the Path?: Experiencing the Path of Christian Spirituality in Different Millennia

Part II Heaven on Earth

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

This work, originally published in 1654, was subtitled *A Serious Discourse Touching a Well-Founded Assurance of Men's Everlasting Happiness and Blessedness*. Quoting Augustine in a footnote who said, "Nothing is good, without the chiefest good," Brooks sets out to turn the believer toward true joy and satisfaction in God if he can realize the chief good of assurance of salvation.¹ "Communion [with God] is the result of union [with God]." "Communion is a reciprocal exchange between Christ and a gracious soul." High communion with Christ will yield you two heavens, a heaven upon earth, and a heaven after death."² Being in a true state of grace means that one is going to heaven; living with a knowledge of assurance of it brings the experience of heaven to begin here.³ Assurance clarifies one's grasp of God, for being assured of His unshakable love enables her to see God as sweet whether He approaches in judgment or tenderness.⁴

It is possible to truly possess grace but lack assurance.⁵ A major reason for loss of assurance in the true believer is a condemning memory of past sins.⁶ Sin in the present can cause a loss of assurance. That does not mean grace is lost, but the beauty and sweet enjoyment of grace is what is suspended.⁷

Direct revelation such as by a vision or mystical experience is not necessary for assurance. The Apostle Paul knew assurance by God's promises and Christ's completed work (Romans 8:32-34). To know one belongs to Christ by covenant and marriage yields joy in the present and strength in death.⁸ In fact, one may face death with joy because "the assured soul knows that death shall be the funeral of all his sins and sorrow, of all afflictions and temptations, of all

¹ *Heaven on Earth*, p. 303.

² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 318, 320.

desertions and oppositions.” Death is an outlet to sin and an inlet to the “soul’s clear, full, and constant enjoyment of God.”⁹

“Faith in time will, of its own accord, raise and advance itself to assurance. Faith is an appropriating grace.”¹⁰ Brooks gives examples of those whose experiences resemble mystical accounts that bolstered faith. A man named Mr. Frogmorton who ministered publicly in preaching, went thirty-seven years without assurance, but an hour before his death was visited by God. With relief he exclaimed, “He is come, He is come!”¹¹

God may with good reason deny assurance to believers at times. It may be that His design is to drive a struggler deeper into spiritual disciplines such as mourning, repenting, self-judging, self-loathing and self-searching so that one might grow in conformity to Christ and so that His strength becomes apparent in contrast to human weakness.¹² Such intense times of struggle prove the rotten bitterness belonging to all that Satan and the world presented as sweetness. Further, this period of darkness in the soul demonstrates how it has been robbed of the image, holiness, beauty and glory of God. An additional byproduct of the struggle for assurance is the development of humility as one must learn to lean fully on Christ for help.¹³

Why might a sweet experience of assurance be granted? Brooks suggests that it may be given most immediately after conversion to sustain the soul if Satan would attempt to steal it back, just as Jesus was granted assurance by the Father before entering into a period of Satanic temptation.¹⁴ Another reason is that assurance can bolster one who will soon be called to enter into difficult or dangerous service. As an example Peter, James and John were present at the Transfiguration as preparation for the peril and subsequent demanding ministries into which they would be immersed. Also Paul, who had been granted a great exposure to God’s glory in a mystical experience, served with self-sacrificing zeal.¹⁵ According to Brooks, enjoying God’s presence is better than all other things in the world.

God also grants a taste of His goodness in order that He may be glorified when onlookers recognize the noble spirit in one who is suffering yet also experiencing joy in divine fellowship.¹⁶ While hearing the Word preached or participating in the sacraments God may specially visit a believer with His goodness so as to train

⁹ Ibid., p. 410.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 322.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 342.

¹² Ibid., p. 331.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 332-334.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 348.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 357-358.

the affections and desires toward heaven.¹⁷ Our author is careful to assure the reader that not every Christian will receive such experiences as he here describes, whether that be due to a secret cherishing of sin or God withholding for some other purpose.¹⁸ A caution is included against seeking an experience as an end in itself instead of appreciating such an event as contributing to growth in holiness. The process of sanctification must remain the framework for interpreting instances of assurance or lack thereof.¹⁹

An investigation into hindrances or impediments to receiving assurance begins with what Brooks calls “despairing thoughts of mercy” which he identifies as a sin.²⁰ It is when the soul refuses to be comforted and chooses to see only the negative and darkness and evil. Satan is active in conjuring such despair as he seeks to discredit God’s promises. In fact, as an example, Brooks cites Judas as sinning worse by his despair than in his betrayal of Jesus. To despair over past sins is to refuse to trust that Christ’s sacrifice was sufficient for the sins in question.²¹ In his work on Satan’s devices, Brooks says that denying that Christ’s death fully paid for and cancelled out one’s sins is itself a sin of unbelief and must be confessed. “Christ has the greatest worth and wealth in him.”²² God may allow a believer to struggle with sin so as to grant a distaste for earthly things, to grow a longing for Christ, to teach humility and a reliance on divine power for deliverance, and to instill compassion for fellow strugglers.²³ It is appropriate to repent of even being discouraged by personal sins because persistent discouragement is rooted in ignorance and unbelief – “ignorance of the richness, freeness, fullness, and everlastingness of God’s love” as well as the power and efficacy of Christ’s death and the wealth and glory of His righteousness and of the mystical union which connects the believer to Jesus.²⁴

Comfort comes by realizing that many famous saints have wrestled with despairing feelings.²⁵ Note that sin threw down Noah, the most righteous man, Abraham the greatest believer, David the best king, Samson the strongest man, Solomon the wisest, Moses the meekest, and Job the most patient.²⁶ Yet they each found forgiveness and in the end were proven to be genuine and kept by God’s grace.

A second identifiable impediment is Satan causing a believer to obsess about things too high for human understanding, such as fixating on the mystery of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 363.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 365.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 370.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 373.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 376-377.

²² Brooks, Thomas. *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* (Lexington, KY: Renaissance Classics, 2012), 131.

²³ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁵ *Heaven on Earth*, p. 382.

²⁶ *Precious Remedies*, p. 152.

election and whether a person has been chosen by God.²⁷ The secret decrees of God should be respected as such. It is useful to recognize that Satan is the instigator of such fruitless pursuits and to confess with Deuteronomy 29:29 that the secret things belong to God while the things revealed are the basis for our faith.²⁸ Personal feelings or reasoning must be held as suspect and not as reliable authorities to govern life and belief. When they dislodge God's Word from the position of authority, doubt may soon enter as well.²⁹ Assurance is not based on a feeling of being saved.

Assurance may fade from the lives of those who are careless and lazy or superficial in their participation in spiritual disciplines.³⁰ Such laziness is contrasted with the fervent dedication for which the Apostle Peter calls in 2 Peter 1:10-11.³¹

Assurance may become scarce for those who improperly love the world. Augustine said that "earthly riches are full of poverty,"³² and Brooks stated that "God will not give the sweetmeats of heaven, to those that are gorged and surfeited with the delicacies of the earth."³³ Further, God will withdraw assurance when His love is abused and the believer cherishes a darling sin in his heart. Cherishing darling sins destines one to be a spiritual dwarf because sin is a poison that turns nourishment to rottenness. A malnourished soul will be prone to doubting.³⁴ To confront such sins, one must focus on growing in the grace that directly opposes the root of that particular sin. Then consider how you will regard those sins when on your deathbed. Be devoted to fasting and prayer, and remove yourself from every occasion of temptation.³⁵

While a mystical experience of finding assurance from God may be very interesting to consider, Brooks encourages one to examine himself objectively to find evidence of grace such as recognizing within oneself faith, a pattern of patient waiting on God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, an inner desire to be approved by God more than others, a hope that sin will be cured and not merely covered, and a love for Christ that holds a supreme ranking in the heart.³⁶ There must be a distinguishing between those who possess superficial or speculative knowledge of Christ and those who have experimental knowledge of Him. "He doth well that discourses of Christ, but he doth infinitely better that, by

²⁷ *Heaven on Earth*, p. 382

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

³¹ At this point Brooks quotes Evagrius on an historical point in a footnote (page 388).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 390.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 395.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 418, 419, 422, 424, 425. Here is included a mere sampling. Many other things such as prayer and repentance are covered in this section. Later sections note additional criterion such as a willingness to give oneself for the good of others (444) and zeal/courage for God (Daniel 11:32) (445).

experimental knowledge, feeds and lives on Christ.”³⁷ Just as it was not Adam’s seeing but actually tasting the forbidden fruit which unleashed misery into his life, so it is not merely seeing Christ but feeding on Him that brings happiness.

The type of faith that persists and appropriates assurance has three objects: Christ, His righteousness which causes us to be acceptable to God, and the precious promises of Scripture.³⁸ Faith may at times seem to go dormant just as trees retract their life into their roots for the winter but blossom again in spring and produce fruit. Even the strongest faith can be shaken for a time.³⁹

Repentance is the close associate to faith that appropriates assurance. A genuine repentance includes recognition of sin, confession and contrition. “A soul that hath sinned away all shame is a soul ripe for hell, and given to Satan.”⁴⁰ So to experience shame as a part of genuine repentance should be a comfort to the one seeking objective signs of assurance. Repentance turns a person in the direction of obedience. Obedience that gives evidence of grace at work is obedience that is both active and passive. Passive obedience includes suffering, even to the point of death.⁴¹ Obedience is rooted in love, namely a love for Christ and His excellence and beauty and worth. Genuine love is of such a quality that it leads believers to love the gift of salvation for the sake of the Giver.⁴²

The prayer that accompanies salvation has an impact on the life of the one offering the prayer in that “faith is increased, hope strengthened, the spirit exhilarated, the heart pacified, the conscience purified, temptations vanquished, corruptions weakened, the affections enflamed, the will more renewed.” “Prayer is a spiritual chair, wherein the soul sitteth down at the feet of the Lord, to receive the influences of his grace.”⁴³

Sometimes assurance is produced directly by testimony of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26). But how is it possible to distinguish between communication from the Spirit and counterfeit attempts from Satan? Generally, the Holy Spirit will not use an audible voice but works within the human spirit. The Holy Spirit will not grant assurance of the Father’s love to one who is not walking in holiness. The Holy Spirit will not be the author of a shaky or unstable testimony. The Holy Spirit may give evidence of His presence (e.g., by creating love, repentance, holiness, etc.), but not give a witness of adoption. Sometimes He shows Himself a regenerating Spirit, other times a sealing Spirit or enlightening or rejoicing. The

³⁷ Ibid., p. 438.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 446-448.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 454.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 464-466.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 475.

⁴² Ibid., p. 478.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 496.

Holy Spirit will not deceive. The witness of the Spirit will not contradict Scripture. The Holy Spirit will only foster what is holy.⁴⁴

Christ should be sought more than assurance because He is the source of assurance, and He is more lovely and precious than assurance. He must be sought above all the graces of salvation.⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 518-522.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 524-525.